# Participatory Action Research Toolkit:

## *An Introduction to Using PAR as an Approach to Learning, Research and Action*

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## Participatory Action Research

is collaborative research, education and action used to gather information to use for change on social or environmental issues. It involves people who are concerned about or affected by an issue taking a leading role in producing and using knowledge about it.

Many names are now used to describe research processes that are in some way 'participatory': e.g. Participatory Appraisal, Participatory Learning and Action, Community-Based Participatory Research. PAR is distinct because:

- it is driven by participants (a group of people who have a stake in the environmental issue being researched), rather than an outside sponsor, funder or academic (although they may be invited to help),
- it offers a democratic model of who can produce, own and use knowledge,
- it is collaborative at every stage, involving discussion, pooling skills and working together,
- it is intended to result in some action, change or improvement on the issue being researched.

## *What this toolkit offers*

This toolkit is intended to provide guidance on what a PAR project commonly looks like, how to work together and some questions to ask as you go. It does not provide advice on methods, as these will vary depending on what the research is about. There are many sources available for methods to use within a PAR research approach.

## *When would you use PAR?*

If you want to gather and use information so that benefits come to the people it directly affects. PAR is used by a whole range of community groups and organisations (where people already know each other and/or work together), and also by groups that come together for the purposes of research and action on a particular issue.

## *Is PAR a method or an approach?*

PAR is an *approach* to research. It is a set of principles and practices for originating, designing, conducting, analysing and acting on a piece of research.

PAR is not a *method*. Within PAR projects, many different methods may be used – group discussion, interviews, diagramming, video, photography, art, surveys, mapping, the collection of environmental data, computer analysis of datasets, etc.

## *An example:*

A PAR project that involved a collaboration between the Lune River Trust and human and physical geographers from Durham University is described in detail elsewhere. This project gave rise to this toolkit, and provides some illustration of the issues that follow.

The team included members of the Lune Rivers Trust (LRT) in Lancashire, and three members of Durham University team who had expertise in river science, environment/ecology, and the use of PAR. We worked together over several months. Each meeting involved planning, action and reflection. The first task was to decide on the issue that the research would focus on. A list of issues that the LRT were currently concerned about was drawn up and discussed, until the research was narrowed down to the problem of slurry getting into the river. The river scientist on the University team gathered together some previous research on slurry and shared this with the participants. They then defined the exact question they would like to answer, spending time discussing the potential benefits and pitfalls and how they would deal with political sensitivities around the issue. He then introduced them to SCIMAP, a computer mapping software package, as a possible aid to the research. The LRT participants critiqued its assumptions, and came up with the idea of using it to produce a farm vulnerability model. Working together, we then produced this over several weeks. The river scientist undertook modelling each week, and at meetings the group critiqued the outputs, added to them, clarified them and gave him directions for the next week. In between, using the maps produced, they undertook surveys of land use cover and building use which fed into the analysis, and stipulated what the final outputs should look like. Once the research was complete, the whole team planned its dissemination, and then evaluated the project both as a group and as individuals.

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## *Typical stages of a PAR project*

PAR involves recurrent stages of Planning, Action and Reflection, followed by Evaluation. Some typical stages of a PAR project are:

| PHASE | ACTION |
|---|---|
| *Action* | Establish relationships and common agenda with all stakeholders. |
| | Collaboratively decide on issues |
| *Reflection* | On research design, ethics, knowledges and accountability |
| *Action* | Build relationships |
| | Identify roles and responsibilities |
| | Collectively design research processes and tools |
| | Discuss potential outcomes |
| *Reflection* | On research questions, design, working relationships and |
| | information required |
| *Action* | Work together to implement research and collect data |
| | Enable participation of all members |
| | Collaboratively analyse findings |
| | Collaboratively plan future actions |
| *Reflection* | On working together |
| | Has participation worked? |
| | What else do we need to do? |
| *Action* | Begin to work on feeding research back to all participants and plan for |
| | feedback on process and findings |
| *Reflection* | Evaluate both the action and reflection processes as a whole |
| *Action* | Collectively identify future research and impacts |

*Table 1: Typical key stages in PAR (adapted from Kindon et al., 2007)*

In this way, research in PAR typically goes through a cycle: **Planning, Action, Reflection, Evaluation**. You may undertake these cycles every time you meet, or you may, for example, save the evaluation until the action is complete.

## Questions to ask at each stage

In PAR, there is no blueprint for must-have methods or steps to go through (the action part of the research cycles).

What follows are some questions for the PAR group to address as the research progresses (the reflection part of the **research** cycles). These are ordered under 7 themes that are central to PAR: collaboration, knowledge, power, ethics, building theory, action, emotions and well-being. We include some guidance from our own experiences to help you to address these.

It is important to remember that PAR has to remain flexible in use. This means that actions sometimes change, and even questions can change, as everyone in the group puts their learning into the ring. This doesn't mean that PAR is a 'soft' or 'unscientific' way to do research. It is a valid, widely accepted alternative to a traditional scientific approach, and can be more appropriate for certain topics.

## 1. Collaboration

**Who will be involved in conducting this research?** Most often, an existing group will decide to use PAR to address an issue of concern to them. If the research project is entirely run by policy-making bodies, or University researchers, it is unlikely to be PAR. Sometimes a collaboration can turn into PAR (in our case, University researchers applied for research funding based on previous joint work, and then worked with the wider group to determine the research questions and process).

**What roles will they have?** For example, it is common to have a smaller group involved in planning and undertaking the whole research project, drawing a wider group/community into certain stages of the research. Or the whole group may follow the whole process through, or group members may drop in and out.

**Do we need to invite outside experts?** People external to the group may be able to provide training, use certain methods, or offer guidance on specific aspects of the research or dissemination of findings. However, there needs to be a reciprocal agreement about who owns the research and how it will be used.

**What principles will we agree in working together?** It is important for these principles to be collectively decided and that everyone has a say. Examples may be about, for example, communication, ownership of data, or the use to which they are put.

**How will we work?** For example, how frequently do we need to meet, and what will we do between meetings? This will depend on the projected timescale of the research, as well as group members' availability and time.

**Who will facilitate meetings?** This could rotate, or roles can be allocated from the start. It can be useful to have someone with experience facilitating meetings. However, it is important that this person does not let their views predominate over other people's in making decisions.

**How will we plan the details of the research?** The group may not need aids to help with this. But, for example, we used the '5Ws' can be useful as a way of organising decision-making actions to be taken:

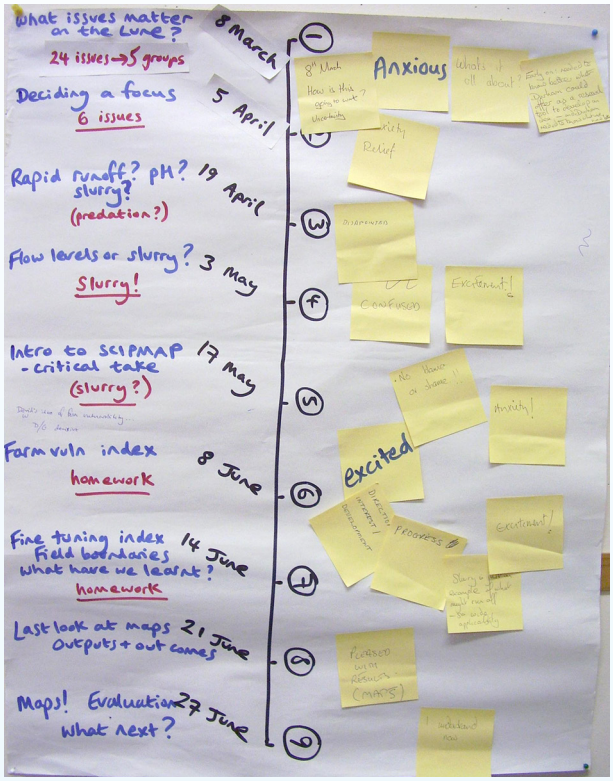
- *WHAT will be done?*
- *WHO will be involved?*
- *WHERE will it take place?*
- *WHEN will each stage happen?*
- *HOW will we do this?*

Inevitably, these plans will change as the research progresses: new ideas, sources of data, people whose opinions need to be asked, often surface. Equally, some plans might turn out not to be possible or are superseded by other ideas and priorities. We found it was important to make sure, as far as possible, that everyone in the group had the same opportunities to suggest these changes, so that no one person dominated.

**How will we build in opportunities to reflect as well as plan and act?** Building in a 15 minute roundup/evaluation at the end of each meeting can be useful. In our group, we found that reflection took place all the time, as participants were very critical and engaged with the research. Such reflection can sometimes feel like it is slowing you down, but it is essential to get to where you want to be.

## 2. Knowledge

**What questions are most important?** Your PAR group may already know exactly what the research will be about. If not, it is often useful to 'brainstorm' as many issues as you can think of, and then evaluate and rank them in terms of importance and feasibility for your group to address. If you have an issue already, brainstorming can help to gather together what the group already knows, and where the gaps lie. It took our group several meetings to agree on the issue, and pinpoint exactly what the specific research questions would be.




**What different kinds of knowledge are going to be important?** And do they match the knowledge that people in the group have? For example, will you need particular datasets about people or the environment? You may need to apply to get access to these, or you may be able to gather your own data. Again, will it be useful to ask other people with specific expertise onto the team? Bear in mind that people who don't usually conduct research can be sceptical about the value of their own knowledge. This was the case of some of our group members, but everyone turned out to have detailed and critical knowledges about some aspect of the project – some from their jobs as engineers, academics or farmers, some through interests such as environmentalism and angling, some from experience of living close to the river.

**What methods do we need to use to find the answers to our research questions?** Any research methods can be used in PAR. The most important principle here is that they are able to give answers to the research questions you have decided on. On our project we used a range of mapping, modelling and environmental survey methods to investigate farmyard vulnerability to slurry pollution. However, a range of social research methods would have been useful too, if we had decided to find out more from farmers or other people or organisations.

**What kinds of skills will be needed?** Do we have these skills among the group, or do we need to bring in other people to provide help? Doing research collaboratively doesn't mean that everyone needs to understand or be able to use those skills: tasks can be delegated to certain people.

**What can each person present contribute to the research process?** For example, there are tasks aside from the research itself, like organising meetings, note-taking, and communicating with a wider reference group.

## 3. Power

**Who usually carries out research and makes decisions on issues like the ones we have identified?** It can be useful to ask this question, to help establish how the PAR project will change this. On our research issue, local knowledge has rarely been the basis of research or policy – instead, the group identified a tendency for environmental policy to be 'parachuted' down and not necessarily locally appropriate.

**Does our research allow others (outside of those who usually undertake research) to plan the research?** PAR is often used to try and relay alternative knowledge and opinions to more powerful groups or organisations.

**Are those people who are facilitating and involved in the steering group representative of the wider group affected by this issue?** Sometimes, in an attempt to draw in 'professional' expertise and influence change, PAR projects are peopled by those already in knowledge-creating groups. Having better representation is important, if PAR is going to relay alternative knowledge and opinions.

**Are there people who are not represented, who we need to involve at certain stages? If so, how?** For example, our PAR group decided from the start that it would be important to have farmers involved, both for their knowledge of slurry and farming, and to advise on effective actions so as to avoid alienating farmers. However, it was difficult to get farmers to come to every meeting (as it was lambing season), so a planned action was presenting and disseminating the findings to farmers.

**How will we conduct meetings so that everyone is listened to and nobody dominates?** The role of the facilitator is important here. This role (which might rotate) involves allowing everyone to speak. Using 'diagramming' or paper and pen methods (e.g. a flipchart on the table in front of everyone) can help to encourage everyone to put ideas in.

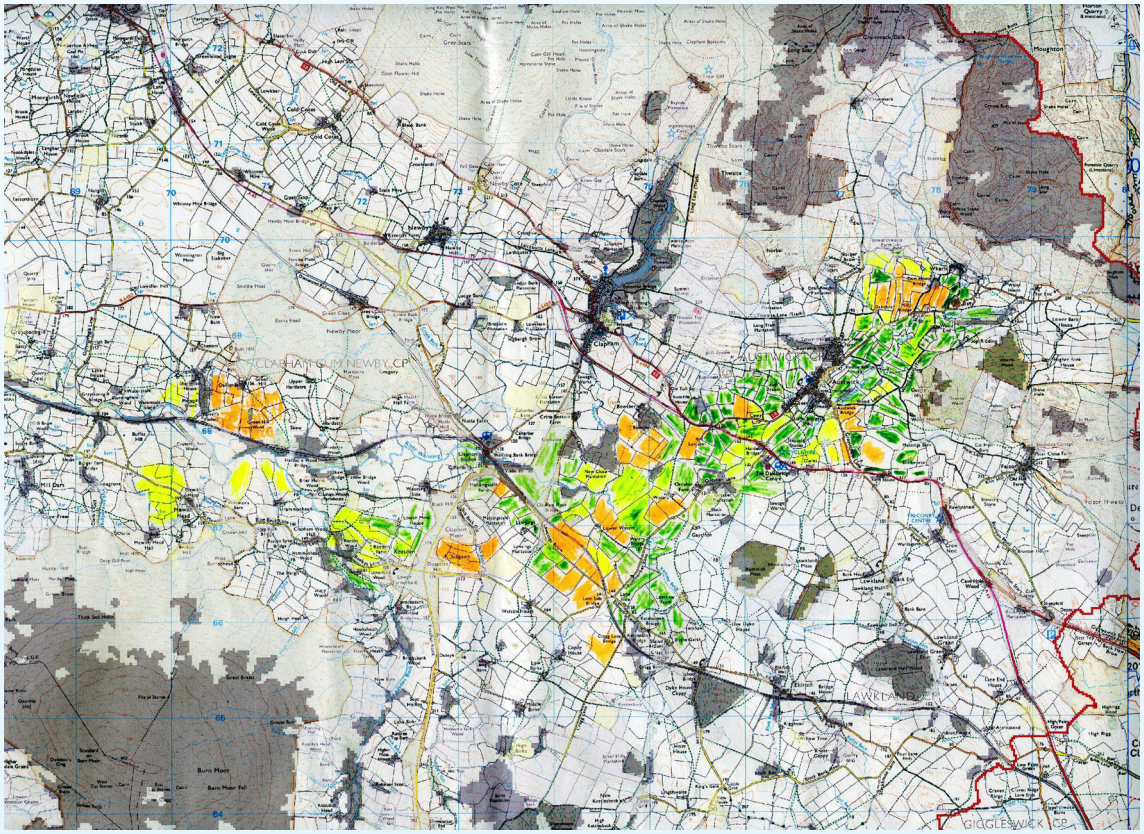
**How will we deal with disagreement, be sure that we don't gloss over differences, but discuss and work through different opinions?** Spending time discussing issues fully is never time wasted. Again, good facilitation helps (above), and diagramming can help with evaluating and prioritising different issues, ideas and actions. We found this essential for agreeing on the research questions, and taking decisions along the way. You may decide that the findings and outputs of the research should reflect these differences.

## *4. Ethics*

**Do individuals (or the whole group) want to be anonymous?** Depending on the topic of the research and its sensitivity, you may decide on a blanket policy on this. Often participants may choose for themselves. Anyone who is interviewed as part of the research should be asked whether or not they wish to remain anonymous.

**How are we going to store information in a way that preserves confidentiality?** When you store data about people, you need to comply with the Data Protection Act, as well as respect any sensitivities or concerns that the people involved may have.

**How are we going to be accountable?** This can be addressed by thinking about how to record what is said and what happens during the research process, from the start, and deciding who should get to see this information (so long as you comply with the DPA, see above). There may be situations, people or organisations from which it is wise to safeguard certain information; these can be identified early on or may become evident as the research progresses.



**What are the potential sorts of harm that the research might cause? How can we avoid these?** All research carries risks. For example, research can cause environmental damage, cause distress to people, or inflame local conflicts. On our project, the LRT had good working relationships with local farmers which they did not want to jeopardise. Through careful discussion and planning, we worked out in advance how to promote and use the farm vulnerability model without offending or 'finger-pointing' at individual farmers.
**What are the potential benefits the research might lead to? How can we maximise these?** One of the main reasons that groups use PAR is to see some benefits from the research, so it is worth thinking hard and creatively about this. Record early on what the group hopes to get out of the research, and revisit/update this regularly.

## *5. Building theory*

**How will we record discussions, ideas, and the development of the research?** You may want (with everyone's consent) to tape record meetings, or simply to have a note-taker. It is also important to summarise key points and actions after each meeting, and to circulate these to everyone.

**How will we stand back from time to time to reflect on how the research is going and what has been achieved?** Again, this underlines the importance of building reflection into the research cycle – one way of doing this is after each meeting (above), or you may decide to do it less frequently.

**Who will be involved in analysing the findings, and will everyone understand how this was done?** Depending on the sorts of data and methods of analysis needed, you may delegate this to one person or just a few people. They should report back clearly on what they have done.

**Who will be involved in interpreting what the findings mean?** How can a wide group be involved in making sense of the findings and drawing conclusions from them? As PAR groups research a collectively agreed issue, everyone is able (and has the right) to interpret what the findings mean and their implications. This way, a number of possible interpretations are most likely to emerge and be evaluated. This is a key stage in – and benefit of – the process of creating knowledge collectively.

**How will we plan what outputs should be produced from the research?** Will some people take a leading role in writing up the findings, and if so, how and when will others have input? On our project, everyone was involved in discussing the most useful outputs and where to disseminate them. The university researchers took a lead on writing as they had most time to commit to this, and other group members had opportunities to have input. Outputs were co-authored by the University researchers and the LRT to reflect the collaborative nature of the research.

## *6. Action*

**What changes are needed, according to the findings of the research – e.g. to understanding, behaviour, policy?** Deciding on the implications of the research for action is a crucial stage in PAR. Occasionally, a PAR group might agree that no action is needed (for example if the findings show there isn't a problem after all; or everyone agrees that the learning that has taken place during the research is enough).

**Who will do what? Who has the time and ability to get involved in follow-up actions? What resources would help?**
Should the findings be shared outside of the group for this to take place? Sometimes, the findings will be used only by the group itself. Often, you may want to use them to influence others. In our research, the LRT was clear that it wanted to use some of the research outputs (maps, toolkits) in its own work, but also to be involved in promoting and disseminating the work much more widely. The outputs were therefore written with the specified audiences in mind, including national policy-making organisations. Presentations at follow-up conferences and workshops were made jointly by the academic researchers and the LRT.

**How do we want to share and promote the findings of the research?** There are lots of possible modes of disseminating findings, and you should decide which are most appropriate and feasible. For example: a public meeting, a report to policy-makers, a press release, a poster campaign, a website, direct changes to practice, advocacy work, further meetings with those responsible or affected by the issue in your research.

**Who could help us to get the messages across and stimulate change?** Sometimes, it is useful to recruit people in more powerful positions or organisations to help promote the research findings. Making them aware of the research at an earlier stage means they are more likely to respond when it is complete.

## 7. Emotions and well-being

**Is the research topic something that people care passionately about, or that directly affects their well-being?** Generally researchers and scientists are presumed to put their feelings to one side when conducting research. But none of us actually do. Especially where we are researching a social or environmental issue that we care about, it is normal to feel emotionally invested in research to some degree. Depending on the topic, strong feelings may be involved and these may affect participants inside and outside the research meetings. The research process itself, especially where a group is working together, can impact people in this way too. This includes experienced researchers and scientists. In our group we were explicit about these feelings at various stages. Talking about this aspect of the research with each other, as part of reflection, improved our understanding of the research and the decisions that we were making.

**How will we ensure that the space we work in is as comfortable and hospitable as possible for participants?** It is important to provide a space where all participants feel comfortable, for participation to work well. Decisions about the venue for meetings and the refreshments provided may seem trivial, but making sure they suit everyone makes for a happier and more effective research project.

**How will those involved in meetings deal with negative emotions?** As discussed above, there may be differences or even conflict with PAR projects. Anger or hostility may surface during meetings, and facilitators and others should have a strategy to deal with these.

**Might the research affect others outside of the PAR group?** Thinking about the possible impacts of the research on other people's feelings and well-being (e.g. if it raises sensitive issues for them) is part of planning the ethics of the research (above).

**Do we have back up strategies, such as pointing people to sources of advice for particular problems or counselling services, for participants who need them?** This is only likely to apply if the research is on particular topics, but is part of the responsibility and the 'ethics of care' of good researchers.

### Reference

Kindon S, Pain R and Kesby M (2007) *Participatory action research approaches and methods: connecting people, participation and place*. Routledge.